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By: JD Prose

U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire and five House Republican colleagues spent part of July 4 in Yemen and the rest in the African nation of Djibouti, enjoying, oddly enough, bratwurst and beer.

As it turned out, the commander of the military base they were visiting is from Wisconsin, so there was a little taste of home for troops and visitors alike, said Altmire, D-4, McCandless Township.

"We just wanted to show (U.S. troops) that we were thinking about them on the day that they're making possible," Altmire said Tuesday.

The congressional delegation left June 29 for Bratislava, Slovakia, where they spent a few days before traveling to Tbilisi, Georgia. From there it was on to Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti before passing through a naval base in Rota, Spain, on the way home Friday.

Altmire said Slovakia and Georgia are "great American allies" with a number of troops "greatly disproportionate to their populations" fighting in Afghanistan.

Historically, there are strong ties between Pittsburgh and Slovakia, Altmire said. The Pittsburgh Agreement, which created "Czecho-Slovakia" -- was signed in the city in May 1918, and there are plenty of western Pennsylvanians with roots in that region, he said.

Altmire said U.S. Steel is the largest employer in Slovakia, and Westinghouse Electric Co., which was founded in Pittsburgh in 1886 and is now based in Cranberry Township, is vying

against French and Russian suitors for a contract to build a new nuclear reactor.

"We really hammered it home how important it is that they choose Westinghouse," Altmire said.

In Georgia, Altmire said, he learned that Georgian and American forces train together and then serve in Afghanistan in the same units.

While in Yemen, a nation seen as the new breeding ground for al-Qaida forces, the delegation met with President Abdo Hadi. While he said al-Qaida 's "strongest presence in the world right now" is in Yemen, Altmire said its leaders were mistaken if they expected a warm welcome from the Yemeni government.

"I don't think I came away with the impression that (Hadi's) pro-American, but he is definitely anti-al-Qaida ," Altmire said.

Djibouti is going to be a major strategic point for America in coming years, Altmire said, because it is situated along the Gulf of Aden, where Somali pirates are active and disrupting sea trade, and near other countries, such as Somalia, that are seen as potential havens for al-Qaida .

"It's going to be the new front, as we wind down in Afghanistan, as to where the al-Qaida presence is likely to be," Altmire said.

Altmire said he is sure that most Americans do not realize how closely our troops are working with other forces on security issues. "My takeaway is that we do have friends around the world," he said, "and we need to strengthen those bonds."